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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an approach for teachers to use in editing students' poems. The general editorial tactic recommended is for teachers to edit first drafts toward figures of speech, and towards the schemes and tropes that are latent or emergent within the students' writing. It is suggested that teachers avoid dealing directly with the contents of students' personal meanings in their poems. A sample of a student's work is given and then discussed in terms of editing the work to encourage the student to find a trope. The next step is to set up these core words and phrases on the page and to give the poems a sense of closure, possibly by echoing at the end some of the material mentioned earlier in the poem. The teacher should also be concerned about editing towards the scheme of the poem and arranging the poem so as to heighten these parallelisms. Students will learn from this kind of editing to look more carefully at what they have written. (TS)

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The Teacher as Editor:

Part One, Verse

CS 202 718

As teachers of writing, we must learn to cherish and work with whatever writing the students authentically give. The kind of writing we strive for--authentic expression, whether as spontaneous outburst, or as free writing, or as something more directed--will reflect the natural complexity of the human being who produced it. And so, one piece of draft can contain several possibilities, several different strands of expression and meaning. Traditional literary theory can help us sort out these strands and so hold in view their various and separate possibilities.

The traditional theory states flatly that, just as there are only three primary colors, so too there are three and only three basic literary forms. These forms arise from three primary impulses: the narrative impulse, the dramatic, and the lyric. The narrative impulse leads to the basic form called story. The dramatic impulse leads to the basic form called dialogue. The lyric impulse leads to the form called poem.

In complex combinations these impulses can produce something like Hamlet, in which the narrative, the dramatic, and the lyric impulses are all at work, and in which the three basic forms are woven together in a single work of art. But we do

these basic forms dubious honor by thinking of them solely as "literary" and by calling them "creative writing."

For one thing, our all consuming commercial culture too-promptly relegates things labelled "Creative" to the category of "non-essential." For another thing, it is all-too-easy to treat things called "creative writing" as somehow untouchable, something too delicate, somehow beyond the grubwork of editing and revision. Both the hard-nose and the hands-off attitudes are wrong in this case. For, far from being fragile non-essentials, the story, the dialogue, and the poem are truly basic forms out of which secondary forms like "exposition," "description," and "argumentation" have been abstracted and taught as if <u>they</u> were basic.

When the writing teacher looks at students' draft, the emerging stories are not always marked or presented as stories, the shifts in voice and perspective that mark latent dialogue are not always there on the surface, nor are the budding poems always set up on the page as poetry. The first job for the teacher is to see what impulse seems to be most dominant within a given piece of draft, and then help students see that regardless of what they may have had in mind during the act of drafting, they have something here that wants to be a story or a dialogue or a poem. And then the teacher should demonstrate the kinds of nudges and changes that can move raw draft

towards the form that best serves its basic impulse. What follows are some observations on helping students see some nudges and changes that can move raw draft towards poetry.

Introduction to Editing Towards the Poem. The signs of a latent poem are so many and so various that we have to start with a necessarily radical simplification. Such a simplification should be one that reduces the subject to its elements, and to do that it needs to be rooted in a theory well thought out. The theoretical frame we use here is has centuries of thought behind it and is so ancient and traditional that it is always a pleasure to discover how useful it still is.

In keeping with this radical, but traditional, simplification, we can say that the poem usually arises from one or both of two impulses: The impulse to play with the physical side of the language and the impulse to do a kind of loving violence to the mental side, the meanings side. Attention to the physical side leads to those figures of speech traditionally called schemes--including such things as rime schemes, metrical schemes, consonance and assonance patterns. Attention to meanings of the language leads to those figures traditionally called tropes--including such things as metaphor, symbolism, and ironies. The general editorial tactic we recommend here is: Edit toward the figures, towards the schemes and tropes that are latent or emergent within the

the students' writing.

This advice is both based on and complicated by the fact that the lyric impulse involves more than an impulse towards playful schemes and innovative tropes; it involves, too, an impulse to express sometimes very delicate and elusive private feelings. Except for the younger children, student-poets are usually not directly concerned with schemes and tropes; usually they're trying to express their own intimate, personal feelings. Our advice is, as far as possible, to avoid dealing directly with the contents of their personal meanings. Concentrate on the schemes and tropes, for one of the important lessons here is that as the mind consciously works with the more technical problems of scheming and troping, it begins to work out the subtleties, the complexities and the nuances involved in expressing the more elusive personal meanings. The advice to edit towards the schemes and tropes is essentially advice to work directly with the more public, less personal aspects of the poetic statement, so that the more personal and private aspects can be worked out indirectly and in passing. It's not the only way to edit poetry, to be sure, but it is a prudent way to work with students, especially adolescents.

Editing Towards the Trope. Very often students will turn in work that contains a bright little trope more or less full-blown--a quick little metaphor or a small irony with the beginnings of an edge. It needs little more than

some pruning, some tightening, and a setting that shows it off well. But more often their work contains details and images that don't really have much figurative power as yet. We want to talk about some editorial tactics for dealing with that more common situation.

A poem very often gains its effect from extreme abbreviation in its statement, abbreviation that invites the reader to fill in the spaces and silences. The reader is invited into the act of making the poem. This invitation, when accepted, is the source for much of the resonance or ripple of implication that a good poem has. One way a poet makes the invitation is by a combination of parallelisms with sharp juxtapositions that abbreviate their statements. So the reader must accept a mental jarring--a jabbing that can be reconciled only by making connections the reader has not made before.

The first editorial job, then, is to find the beginning of a trope in a student's draft--that is, a core of phrases that carry most of the ~~[illegible]~~ meaning. Then you show the student how to prune to get the effect of resonant abbreviation. In the following bit of student writing the core words and phrases have been underlined:

> Here are some words for me and English class. I'm going to tell you some things about me, Mr. Zero Draft. I have a very deep friendship with a young

lady. And what a person she is! I love her. Does that tell you about her? She might move away.

She is a beautiful girl. She has long light brown hair which she doesn't always comb. She has a pair of special eyes which I won't try to describe except that there is a sort of twinkling down deep in them; the last time I saw her she was wearing a pair of milkman's overalls with a few patches on them and a pair of black shoes she got at St. Vincent de Paul's for three dollars. She has a magic smile that lights up her face and shows her white teeth that she loves to brush. I have done a lot of things to earn that smile.

She is magic; I know it. Special. What more is there to say?

. . . . . .

A few weeks have gone by since I wrote that. I know now that she is moving away for sure and it makes me wonder. First of all, what will it be like knowing she's no longer there right across the lake, knowing that I may never see her again? I've only seen her 18 or 19 days out of my life and only talked with her in a real way once, but just knowing that she is there means a lot. Secondly,

what about her? How will people in New York react to her and will she make new friends? I hope so. I must see her before she goes, just once, just to tell her that I love her.

The next step ~~could be~~ is to set up these core words and phrases on the page so as to heighten important parallelisms. Doing so will likely suggest some further cuts. And you might look for ways to use juxtapositions rather than the careful subject-predicate structure of more ~~leisurely~~ prosaic writing:

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~~I have a very deep friendship with a young lady.~~

~~I love her.~~

She might move away.

She is a beautiful girl.

~~She has~~ With her long light brown hair ~~which~~, she doesn't always comb. and her white teeth she loves to brush

~~She has~~ With her a pair of special eyes ~~with a sort of twinkling~~ down ~~deep in them.~~ and her

~~The last time I saw her she was wearing a~~ pair of milkman's overalls with a few patches on them!

~~She has white teeth that she loves to brush.~~

I have done a lot of things to earn her smile.

. . . . . .

~~I know now that~~ she is moving away for sure.

What will it be like ~~knowing~~ when she's no longer there right across the lake ~~knowing I may never see her again?~~

I've only seen her 18 or 19 days out of my life and only talked with her in a real way once.

I must see her before she goes, just once, just to tell her that I love her.

At this point a clean copy is probably in order, which should reveal some more possibilities for tightening and sharpening the statement of the embryonic poem:

She might move away--

~~She is a~~ my beautiful girl

with her long brown hair she doesn't always comb

and her five (?) white teeth she loves to brush

with her ~~pair of~~ special eyes and

her ~~pair of~~ milkman's overalls ~~with a few patches on them.~~

I have done a lot of things to earn her smile.

. . . . . .

She is moving away for sure--

What will it be like when she's no longer right across the lake?

I've seen her only 18 or 19 days out of my life and blowing hair and patched pants

I've only talked with her in a real way once. teeth / eyes / smile (?)

I must see her before she goes, just once, just to tell her ~~that I love her~~

The revisions now are getting more precise. Individual word-choices are becoming crucial. You and the student con-

gotta printer do Not correct these copy! Reproduce my editorial changes as shown on pencil

needs images needs echoes for closure

tinue to work to abbreviate and to juxtapose, moving away from the standard patterns of English prose syntax. And you begin to worry, too, about closure. Though it certainly is not the only device, perhaps the most common way to get a sense of closure is to echo at the end some of the material mentioned earlier. The echoing gives a sense of return, a sense of having gone full circuit--and thus, a closure. The tinkering and polishing and knitting and tying lead, then, to something like:

When She's No Longer Here

She might move away
My beautiful girl
With ~~her~~ the long brown hair she doesn't always comb
And ~~her~~ the white teeth she loves to brush
With her special eyes
And her milkman's overalls

I've done a lot of things to earn her smile

She is moving away for sure
~~What will it be like when she's no longer right across the lake?~~ here

I've seen her only 18 or 19 days out of my life
And I've talked with her in a real way only once
I must see her before she goes
Must see her tangled hair again, and her fine teeth

Her baggy overalls and her special eyes,
Just once more
Just to tell her.

We still have some problems with that tempting, ambiguous, and potentially grotesque, juxtaposition between lines 4 and 5. When students start noticing things like that, they are noticing the kind of things we hoped they would.

Editing Towards the Scheme. As we've said, many things are involved in that category of figures of speech called schemes: rhyme, meter, and various kinds of sound-patterning, for instance. But we can start with what may be the simplest--and in many ways the most productive to work with--that is, parallelism. Consider the following little bit of draft from a student.

Yesterday I took a shower and somewhere in between rubbing my belly, my chest, and my armpits, I made some good decisions. I decided to spend the money I earned picking blueberries last summer to take the first best friend I ever had to see Donovan.

The passage makes it clear that the student was in some way concerned with more than simply commenting about "What I did yesterday." There's a nice contrast between the climactic structure of the first sentence and the quiet anticlimax of the second. There's also that little turn of phrase in "the first best friend I ever had."

First we want to find some features of sound or visual shape or syntax in the draft that are being repeated (or could be changed so as to be repeated). One thing we might notice is the repetition of I with three different main verbs: "I took," "I made," "I decided." Each of these three verbs has one object: "I took a shower," "I made some good decisions," and "I decided to spend the money." Also, the gerund rubbing has three parallel objects: "my belly, my chest, and my armpits." So we might try setting the selection up on the page so as to highlight some of these parallelisms:

Yesterday
I took
a shower
And somewhere in between rubbing
my belly
my chest
and my armpits
I made
some good decisions
I decided
to spend the money I earned picking blueberries last summer to take the first best friend I ever had to see Donovan.

This much highlighting of parallelism reveals some other possibilities:

There is, for instance, the trio of infinitives in that last long line: "to spend," "to take," and "to see." The three are not parallel in the usual serse: The idea is to spend the money in order to take the friend in order to see, and so on, so there's a kind of causal progression linking them. We could set them up as parallels, cutting visually across the logical relationship:

to spend the money I earned picking blueberries last summer

to take the first best friend I ever had

to see Donovan.

The steady diminution of the length of phrases is rather nice and we could match the visual shape with the logical relationship a bit more by staggering the phrases:

to spend the money I earned picking blueberries last summer

to take the first best friend I ever had

to see Donovan

--which gives a pleasing visual shape.

Other possibilities begin to emerge: Do we want to set up "I earned" and "I ever had" as part of our main parallelism of I + verb?

Do we want to expand rubbing into "I rubbed" and put it into the parallel series? Or do we want to set things up so as to foreground the parallelism between rubbing and picking?

All of these seem to be good and valuable editorial considerations. Whether you actually end up with a great poem is not too important. What is important is that when you show students this kind of editorial strategy, you give them a way to continue looking carefully at something they have written. You also teach them something (without their necessarily knowing it) about the nature and basis of rhythm in verse,--whether free or metrical. And they are learning something about grammar, whether or not they have enough of the nomenclature to talk about participles and infinitives and direct objects as we have here. It's not clear how much of the grammatical nomenclature you need to be able to do and talk about this kind of thing--probably not so much as teachers might like to let on (and writers of grammar texts!), perhaps not even any at all. And finally, you are also teaching your students that "creative writing" is not some sort of "hands-off" affair. Even the most "creative" of writers revise and edit.

Here's a form for the poem that heightens many of the parallelisms we've been discussing:

Yesterday
I took
a shower
and somewhere in there as
I rubbed

my belly

m/ chest

and my armpits

I made

some good decisions.

I decided

to spend the money I earned picking blueberries

last summer

to take the first best friend I ever had

to see Donovan.